

# California Women and Education: An Overview

Primary, secondary, and higher education organizations are tasked with, among other things, preparing people for careers. Until the later decades of the 20th century women were often openly discouraged from the study of certain subjects (e.g., science, mathematics) and from obtaining higher degrees. Policies enacted during this time period sought and current practice aims to eliminate discrimination at all levels of education. This Short Subject presents degree attainment trends for California women since the 1960s, compares these to national rates, breaks out rates according to race/ethnic category, and offers a brief discussion.

## WOMEN AND DEGREE ATTAINMENT SINCE THE 1960s

California women have made significant strides in their rates of degree attainment since the 1960s (Figure 1), a decade that included a number of policy changes aimed at increasing educational opportunities such as those found in California's Master Plan for Higher

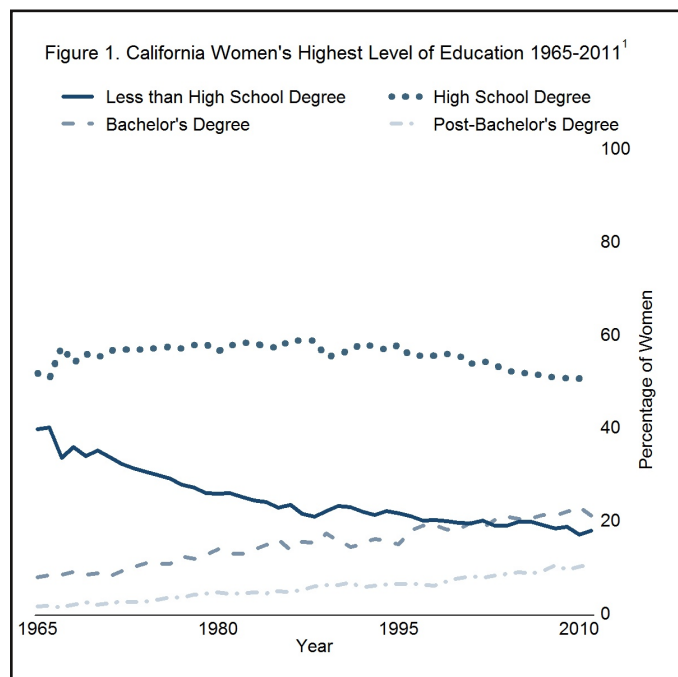
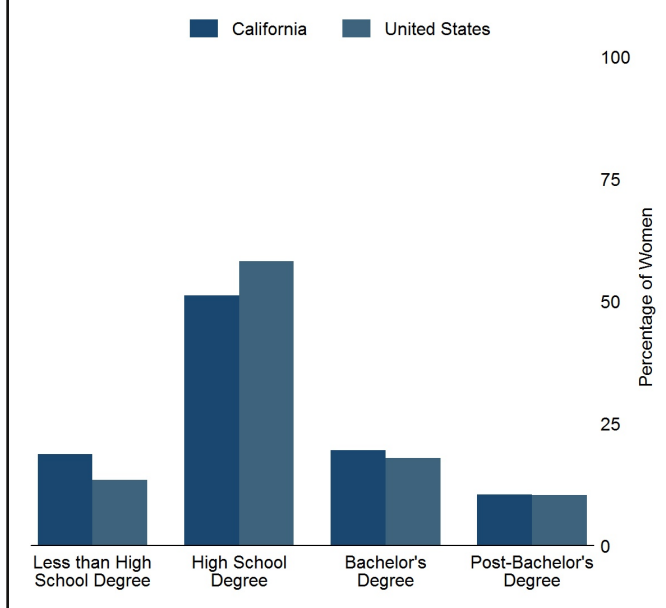


Figure 2. Women's Educational Attainment in California and U.S., 2011<sup>2</sup>



Education. While the proportion of women earning terminal high school degrees or the equivalent (hereafter, high school completion) has remained relatively stable, the proportion of women earning both Bachelor's and Post-Bachelor's degrees has risen steadily. In 2011, 20 percent of California's women earned Bachelor's degrees and 10 percent earned Post-Bachelor's degrees.

## NATIONAL DEGREE ATTAINMENT COMPARISON

Recent Census data suggest that California may fall short of national educational attainment rates for women (Figure 2). While a slightly larger proportion earn a Bachelor's degree than is true nationally (20 percent and 18 percent, respectively), California women are less likely to complete high school. About 19 percent of California women do not earn a high school degree compared to 13 percent nationally. California women appear equally likely to complete Post-Bachelor's degrees than women are nationally.

## WOMEN, DEGREE ATTAINMENT, AND RACE/ETHNIC CATEGORY

The educational attainment of California's women may be related to the diversity of the state's population. Women from different race/ethnic backgrounds exhibit disparate patterns of education (Figure 3). More than 40 percent of Latinas leave school before earning their high school degrees; this is six times the rate of White women (6 percent) in California. Other minority women are roughly twice as likely as White women to leave high school prior to completion.

The rate at which women finish high school also varies across race/ethnic category. Sixty-six percent of American Indian/Alaskan Native women earn terminal high school degrees followed closely by African-American women (65 percent). While these relatively high rates are achievements and many women with terminal high school degrees may receive some college and vocational training (not analyzed here), more attention could be paid to the fact that these women did not complete a college degree. Thus, most women, irrespective of their race/ethnic backgrounds, do not go on to complete higher education degrees.

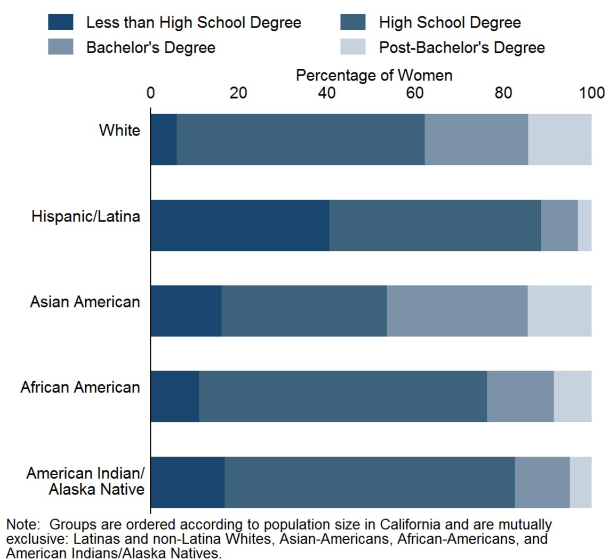
Attainment of more than a high school diploma, an achievement associated with higher incomes, differs sharply across race/ethnic categories. A large proportion of White and Asian-American women (38 and 46 percent, respectively) earn Bachelor's and Post-Bachelor's degrees. In comparison, only 11 percent of Latinas, 17 percent of American Indian/Alaskan Native women, and 24 percent of African-American women earn advanced degrees.

### BRIEF DISCUSSION

While California women have higher levels of education than they did in prior years, disparities across different race/ethnic backgrounds remain. There is likely additional variation according to other factors associated with inequality. Thus, analyses that include nativity, family generation, and socio-economic status may provide more insight into which women achieve more or less education. Further, race/ethnic categories such as Latina and Asian-American encompass a wide variety of ethnicities that may be analyzed separately.

Higher rates of high school completion and more women from each race/ethnic category earning college degrees might mean, among other things, a more skilled California workforce and more purchasing

Figure 3. California Women's Education by Race/Ethnicity<sup>2</sup>



power in the market. Programs aimed at advancing all groups of women through high school completion could be evaluated and developed. Also, in reference to White and Asian-American higher-education rates, Latinas, African-American, and American Indian/Alaskan Native women may benefit from programs aimed at advancing them beyond high school.

### FURTHER READING

Sandy Baum and Stella M. Flores, *Higher Education and Children in Immigrant Families*, Future of Children, 2011.

### REFERENCES

- 1 U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey Internet and Computer Use Supplement Public Use File, 2011.
- 2 U.S. Census Bureau, 2011 American Community Survey Public Use Microdata Sample, 2012.

*This Short Subject was requested by the California Commission on the Status of Women and Girls:*  
[www.women.ca.gov](http://www.women.ca.gov).

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*The authors of this short subject, Tonya D. Lindsey, Ph.D., and Matthew K. Buttice, Ph.D., may be reached at [tonya.lindsey@library.ca.gov](mailto:tonya.lindsey@library.ca.gov) and [matthew.buttice@library.ca.gov](mailto:matthew.buttice@library.ca.gov), respectively.*